

A Hand for the Homeless

The Problem: How to Address Homelessness in Wisconsin

Urban or rural. North, south, east and west. Homelessness is a problem that affects families and individuals across Wisconsin. However, it often can be a difficult issue to quantify. In an effort to provide these statistics, service providers that receive state money submit their data to the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), operated in Wisconsin by the Institute for Community Alliances. [Their most recent report](#), published in July 2018 containing the data for 2017, tells the following story:

- **21,906** clients experiencing homelessness received services and shelter from HMIS agencies
- **17,905** clients stayed in an emergency shelter
 - **56%** of those clients were outside of Milwaukee, Dane, and Racine Counties
- **42%** of persons experiencing homelessness were members of a family or household
- **494** minors received services as unaccompanied homeless youth

A Hand and a Home makes the case that these numbers do not tell the full picture, as they do not include those classified as homeless under a different federal definition, nor do they account for the possible undercounting of homeless during the challenging annual Point-in-Time Count.

The Course of Action: Assembly Republicans Begin the Discussion in 2017

In April of 2017, the Wisconsin Legislature released a series of bills in tandem with 2017-19 state budget priorities to address homelessness in a statewide, comprehensive way, the first major attention the issue had received in decades.

One bill created a new statutory body, the Interagency Council on Homelessness. Chaired by the Governor's designee, Lieutenant Governor Kleefisch, the council contained secretaries or directors of eight state agencies and the four Continuum of Care organizations in Wisconsin – federally mandated collaborative zones of housing and service providers and homelessness advocates.

One year to the day of its authorizing bill becoming law, [the council released its 2019-2022 action plan, *A Hand and a Home: Foundations for Success*](#), which was “[perhaps the state's most coordinated, deepest attempt to prevent and curtail homelessness](#).” The bills in this package were identified as legislative priorities in the plan. They include new programming and \$3.75 million in new spending, more than doubling the state's current commitment.

What's Been Done So Far...

- September 9, 2016 - [Homelessness identified in Forward Agenda](#)
- April 12, 2017 – [Assembly releases Homelessness Package](#)
- September 21, 2017 – Budget signed into law, including homelessness items
- November 27, 2017 – [Homeless bills signed into law, including creation of Interagency Council](#)
- February 12, 2018 – Interagency Council holds first meeting
- April 16, 2018 – Interagency Council hires first director
- November 27, 2018 – [Interagency Council releases first action plan](#)
- February 21, 2018 – Assembly Republicans introduce second round of legislation, based on Council's recommendations

The following is a brief summary that outlines what each of the bills in the new Hand for the Homeless package does. In total, the plan aims to:

2019 Legislation – A Hand for the Homeless

AB 124 - LRB-1854/1, Plumer, Strategy 1.1 (prevention), 1.2 (diversion): Adds \$500,000 annually to the Homeless Prevention Program to help avoid evictions, and creates a new program funded at \$300,000 to begin diversion. Diversion is short-term assistance to steer those who present as homeless into stable housing outside the traditional homelessness system.

AB 119 - LRB-1227/1, Steineke, Strategy 1.3 (SSSG), 1.4 (performance metrics), 1.5 (admin code): Adds \$500,000 annually to the State Shelter Subsidy Grant program, a 50% increase to the fund and its first major increase since its creation in 1994. It also cleans up administrative code. Most significantly, it adds performance metrics to incentivize shelters to responsibly transition individuals into permanent housing.

AB 123 - LRB-1853/1, Snyder, Strategy 1.6: Adds \$900,000 annually (a 300% increase) to the Housing Assistance Program, the state's most flexible funder of Permanent Supportive Housing, Rapid Re-housing, and Transitional Housing.

AB 120 - LRB-1316/1, James, Strategy 2.2: Adds \$500,000 annually (a 100% increase) to the Homeless Case Management Services Program to assist families in shelter with gaining employment or increasing their income.

AB 121 - LRB-1331/1, Dittrich, Strategy 4.1: Creates a Housing Navigation Grant, funded at \$300,000 annually, to work with landlords to find available permanent housing units for individuals experiencing homelessness and to mediate any disputes that may arise.

AB 125 - LRB-1851/1, Pronschinske, Strategy 4.3: Creates an innovative forgivable loan program, funded at \$500,000 annually, to renovate existing units for use as affordable housing.

AB 122 - LRB-1332/1, Rodriguez, Strategies 3.2 and 3.3: Directs the Department of Workforce Development to identify and create programs for homeless youth (age 18-24) and adults, catered to those populations' specific needs. It also mandates collaboration between local Workforce Development Boards and their corresponding homeless response systems.

AB 144 - LRB-1852/1, Kurtz, Strategy 3.4: Adds \$250,000 annually (a 100% increase) to the Skills Enhancement Program to help low-income individuals receive job training and technical skills.